

Remembering Sgt. Verdugo

Teacher copes with losing her husband in Iraq.

[By Michael Lee Pope](#)

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For Kari Youngberg-Verdugo, the most difficult part of dealing with her husband's death is sleeping through the night. The 29-year-old widow lost her husband last month in Iraq. After taking two weeks off, she has returned to her job as a teacher at George Mason Elementary School.

"It's very tiring emotionally and physically to keep up with 19 kids for six hours," she said. "But there's a certain reassurance to it because you kind of forget about everything else when you are teaching."

The end of the school year brought reassurance and support to Youngberg-Verdugo, who recently signed a contract to return next year. Although she is new to the community — she moved here last year to be closer to her husband, who was stationed in Washington — Alexandria has offered its support in cards, letters, food and the caring embrace of concerned strangers.

And so she has decided to stay here for now — facing each new day, without her husband.

THE ROMANCE began in November 2002 when Kari Youngberg met Sgt. Russell Verdugo one chilly night in Adams Morgan. She was visiting friends in Georgetown. He was stationed here. The two hit it off, and he asked her out. She said no, but he was persistent.

They began a whirlwind courtship, exchanging long distance telephone calls and trips across the country. She was an elementary-school teacher in Chicago, and he was a military man in Washington. She taught reading and arithmetic. He specialized in explosive ordnance disposal. They fell in love.

In May 2003, he was dispatched to Afghanistan. By the time he returned to the states in the summer of 2004, they had grown closer than ever. They talked about their past. They wondered about the future. Then, while they were in Chicago for a friend's wedding, he proposed.

"He had the ring in his pocket the whole weekend," she remembered. "He was just waiting for the right moment."

During the reception, he asked her to take a walk on the golf course. She was hesitant, but he insisted. He took the ring out of his pocket and popped the question. She said yes.

The next day, she drove to her parents' house in Michigan. He flew back to Washington. They began planning for a wedding. She began looking for a job. In July 2004, she was offered a position at George Mason Elementary School in Alexandria. They found a place in Mount



Sgt. Russell Verdugo and Kari Youngberg at their engagement.

Vernon.

She hadn't even adjusted to her new job yet — in fact it was her first week — when they got the news. He would be deployed to Iraq in January. The insurgency there demanded more troops, and the body count was growing daily. His specialty in disposing of explosive ordinance would put him in the danger zone, a reality of modern guerrilla tactics in Iraq.

"He was concerned because I was going to be here alone, and I was concerned because he was going to be in an unsafe place," she said. "That's war, I guess."

In October, they were married at Faith Covenant Church in Manistee, Mich., where her parents are retired teachers and respected members of the community.

"We didn't have a honeymoon," she said, fighting back tears. "He had to go out of town on a training exercise, and I had to report to work the next day. We planned to have a honeymoon some day. But — I guess — that won't happen."

AS HE PREPARED for deployment over the coming months, she could tell he was getting anxious about going to Iraq. He followed the military checklists, preparing for every eventuality. This kept him busy, but she could tell that he was concerned.

"It was a nerve-wracking time," she said. "I could tell he was stressed out."

In January, they said their good-byes. It was the last time husband and wife would see one another. He caught a flight to Baghdad while she returned to George Mason Elementary School.

The next few months brought disjointed telephone conversations, cut short by regulation and strained by the war. He couldn't talk about much of his activities. He kept the conversation light, telling stories about other soldiers and talking about movies he watched in the Green Zone.

"Eventually, I came up with 'What can you tell me,' which worked better," she said. "He couldn't tell me about a lot of things, and he kept his emotions to himself."

In February, an improvised explosive device killed his team leader. He tried to shield his wife from the event, but the network of military wives kept her abreast. She implored him to tell her everything.

"He would never really share his emotions about these things," she said. "I guess you can't really face it too much because it's your job."

On Feb. 11, she attended her first funeral at Arlington National Cemetery.

"I was happy that it wasn't Russell, but I felt guilty too," she said. "I felt bad for the wife. She was presented with the flag, and I knew it could have been Russell."

Her husband was up for a promotion, and he became team leader of the unit — staff sergeant. He

was now in charge of U.S. teams that were responsible for disposing of improvised explosive devices, which are now responsible for 70 percent of American casualties in Iraq. From January, when he was deployed, until May, when he was killed, his team responded to more than 100 calls.

His team was one of many that responded to calls about suspicious looking objects in Baghdad. They took rotation responding to the calls. In late May, one of the other teams was called to an area of the city. The team arrived and carried out the standard procedure of securing the location and carefully approaching the object.

It turned out to be nothing. Then, the next day, another suspicious object appeared in the same location. It was her husband's turn.

Insurgents had been watching the soldiers the previous day, taking note of the regimented procedures — watching how the ordnance disposal experts secured an area before moving in. This time, they planted the real explosive under some trash near the security perimeter. The device exploded just as Russell Verdugo was preparing to approach the decoy device. He was killed instantly in one of the bloodiest months of the war. IEDs killed 33 American soldiers in May.

EVERY LITTLE SOUND kept Youngberg-Verdugo up at night. A neighbor's slamming door. A conversation outside her window. Branches of trees scraping up against windows. Any of these could bring that knock at the door.

"You always wonder — are they coming to tell me my husband has been killed."

When the uniformed men did arrive, she knew instantly why they were there.

"It was 10 at night, and so I knew that it had to be bad," she said. "He told me that Russell had died."

The next few days were a confusing mixture of sorrow and regret. She couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't work. She stayed in bed most of the time, sleeplessly mourning her loss.

"It's terrible to try to sleep because that's when your mind starts to wonder," she said. "But you want to sleep because that's when you can get away from everything — if even for a little while."

The community at George Mason Elementary School sent cards and letters. The parents brought more food than she could eat. She had to tell them to stop bringing food because some of it was going bad in her refrigerator. Alexandria's superintendent attended the funeral at Arlington.

"During the service — I'll never forget this — you could hear other services going on at the same time in the cemetery. It was surreal," said Superintendent Rebecca Perry. "It was very sad."

Youngberg-Verdugo was presented with a flag and two posthumous medals — a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. She keeps them in her bedroom where she and Russell used to sleep.

"The whole time I was at Arlington, I kept thinking that I was too young for this," she said. "I'm 29 and I'm a widow."

People often ask her about her opinion of the war — if invading Iraq was justified even if Saddam Hussein did not possess weapons of mass destruction.

"I'm not a very political person," she said. "All I know about the war is that it took away my husband."